



Random Thoughts on Tracking

By Rosemary Janoch

In this column, I would like share some random thoughts that aren't quite enough to write an entire article on, but are worth mentioning to you. I would like to give tips on handlers, dogs, and the tracks themselves.

Since I have seen tracks failed due to inept handling and tracks that I thought were beyond hope passed due to superb handling, let me share some thoughts on handlers first. Successful handlers embrace the *sport* of tracking, and don't just simply train their dogs to track. They can be seen at tracking tests watching each entrant handle their dog. Whether the team passes or fails, much can be learned from watching other handlers work. Successful handlers can be found laying tracks not only for their own club, but for neighboring clubs as well. They read books and articles on tracking. They have a sense of commitment both to the sport and to the training of their own dogs.

Successful handlers have patience. They don't try to rush the dog into making a decision, but allow him the time to work out the problem. They don't second guess the dog, thereby undermining his confidence in himself. For that matter, they don't try to second guess the judges either by trying to figure out where the track goes, but rather wait for the dog to tell them the direction. They have learned to control their nerves and to trust their dog.

Successful handlers have often started in this sport under the guidance of a mentor, and then often become mentors themselves. A mentor helps to keep you honest in your evaluation of your dog's skill level, especially if you lay most of your own tracks. Would you have followed your dog on that turn if you didn't know that was where the track went? Would your dog have stopped

at the turn if you hadn't put that tiny bit of extra tension on the line? A good mentor won't let you fool yourself into believing you are ready for a test when you really aren't.

Do you remember that old saying about the three most important things in selling real estate are location, location, and location? I feel the same way when someone asks me what the most important things are to teach a tracking dog. My answer is always motivation, motivation, and motivation. If that is in place, the rest of the training is a piece of cake. If you ever find your own dog is losing his motivation to track, make the tracks shorter, fresher, and easier. Use food, toys, play, long walks in the woods afterwards, or whatever else highly reinforces your dog because if you lose your dog's love of tracking, you've pretty much lost it all.

Work on your dog's article indication from Day One. Play scent games around the house and around the yard. Let your dog tell you if he prefers to retrieve the article, sit at the article, down at it, or just wag his tail at it, but whatever he tells you he is willing to do, be sure to insist on that indication each and every time. Do not allow the indication to get sloppy. If you decide you are going to use any sort of compulsion with your dog to get a reliable retrieve of the article, please do it away from the field to keep any negative fallout from affecting your dog's willingness to track.

Unless your dog is already in great condition, start an exercise program with him that involves long walks. Build your dog's stamina. Tracking is a far more vigorous activity than it looks. Rarely will I come home from tracking my dogs without them crashing in a corner of the living room and sleeping the rest of the afternoon. They are wearing a harness and dragging me along behind them. They are not breathing normally, but rather are inhaling deeply every few steps. They are concentrating on not losing the track. In the end, the dogs are both mentally and physically exhausted after a difficult track. This is not a sport for wimps, and I am including both the human and canine variety in that statement.

While you are working this exercise program with your dog, throw in more than what you expect to see at a tracking test. More length. More age. More obstacles. More contamination. More of everything. Over prepare your dog and nothing the judges throw at you will phase you.

Learn to let the dog solve the problems. This goes back to the idea that successful handlers are patient. If you are eager to help the dog each time he runs into trouble, he will learn to ask for that help. He will turn around and look at you with pleading eyes and try to convince you he cannot possibly find the track. Other than offering a bit of encouragement, bite your tongue. When you start to help your dog find the track, you are headed down a slippery slope. It is best not to go there. Is the track really too hard for the dog? Then you need to plot a more appropriate track for your dog's ability level. Make it easier if he is having trouble, but don't do the tracking for him. When you click the lead to the harness expect your dog to take off and never look back. I mean that literally. Your dog should not be looking back. If he is looking at you, you need to take a serious look at how you are training your dog. You might be giving him help without even noticing it and he is now learning to depend on you instead of learning to depend on himself.

When you talk to a VST trainer, you might hear the expression "Speed kills." I agree with this statement but I don't think it should be confined solely to VST training. I have seen too many TD and TDX dogs overshoot corners and fly past articles to believe this statement only applies to VST dogs, so be careful with your training. Are you running after your dog because you believe you will squash his motivation if you make him track at a reasonable pace? Not true. I praise like crazy and encourage my dogs to pull with all their strength as I just walk along behind. Running in an unknown field is dangerous for you and foolish for the dog. I strongly suggest you not do

it. Even with puppies and youngsters on a flat mowed field, I might walk very briskly behind them...but I do not run.

Having talked about the handlers and the dogs, let me conclude this article with some thoughts on the tracks themselves. Have a plan before you step on to the field. Know how to get in and get out. Don't step one foot in the field without water on you and a cell phone in your pocket.

Mark the tracks. More harm can be done by correcting a dog when he was right than you can possibly imagine so please don't let that happen to you. Mark the turn so you don't have to guess where it is. Mark the location of the cross tracks so you can tell if your dog is taking one. Mark the articles so you don't let your dog blow past them without giving you an article indication.

Keep a journal of the tracks you lay so that you can measure the dog's progress and plan an appropriate track for the next lesson. If you have a specific test you would like to enter, a journal will help you map out a concrete plan of attack to be ready for that particular test.

Scent the articles well that you will be dropping on the track. This is particularly true of the metal and plastic articles used on a VST track, but I do it with all my articles. My dogs find socks taken off my feet from the day before and I will take the hat right off of my head and drop it in the grass. Those well-scented articles sometimes provide the dog with the motivation to keep tracking. Throw in some non-traditional articles every once in a while like a ball or a toy just to spice things up for your dog. Or try to test his commitment to article indications by placing the article slightly off the track. On occasion, use something very similar to garbage, like a wadded up ball of duct tape, so that your dog really develops the habit of checking out everything he finds. He will learn not to be complacent about his surroundings.

Run blind tracks several times before entering any tracking test. If you cannot pass a blind track put in by one of your friends on a training day, it is unlikely you could pass a blind track at a test where stress and added pressure are thrown in to the mix.

But most of all, simply have fun. Tracking is a wonderful sport to enjoy with both your dog and your friends. I wish you the best of luck in all your tracking endeavors.